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Final Paper

It was not until I was celebrating Mass at St. Andrew's Abbey that I began to reflect on the overlap between 'Community' and 'Communion.' The first several days of the journey deep into the purview of monastic life, while aspiring to the outcomes of a tenured practitioner of Lectio Divina (with mixed results), had left me feeling emotionally open and deeply reflective on many personal and professional obstacles, experiences, and opportunities. It was in this headspace that I re-examined my upbringing in the Catholic Church and wondered why I had never specifically connected the act of communion to the idea of community in any context outside of the church.

It seems like an almost "*too-obvious*" thing to miss. However, there I stood flummoxed by the connection. In fact, the Latin root of Communion is "fellowship, mutual participation, or sharing" ([www.vocabulary.com](http://www.vocabulary.com)). It was here that my previous perception of community was dissolved. It was here that community became less of a thing and more of an action. It was here that the action of the individual within the whole – and the power and potential that lied therein -- truly began to take shape in my mind.

As a result, my philosophy of community began to develop and shift. The tenets *The Rule of Benedict* could easily be the foundation: hospitality, humility, purity of heart. The practice of these acts allows us to depend on each other and offer safe, fulfilling, accountable, interactions with our community. But we must remain mindful of these goals: "Living life deliberately

requires that we take seriously that we never stand alone, but rather we only make full sense because of our authentic relationships with others" (Carey, 2021, p.2).

Within these daily devotions and in the commitment that is made to ourselves and each other, community becomes an ever-evolving entity; not just a group of individuals sharing a common location, geography or set of characteristics.

The purpose of this paper is to juxtapose the foundation of the centuries-old monastic traditions founded by Benedict of Nursia with more recent organizational expertise in search of commonalities that can be put into practice in struggling organizational communities in which a direct impact can be made. Further, utilizing the first-hand testimonials of several of the monks from St. Andrew's Abbey in Valyermo, CA, I hope to illustrate practical application of many of the concepts that have been presented in the context of our readings and group discussions as proof of concept in adoption of these best practices within the communities in which I can make an immediate impact.

One such community exists in my organization, a large national supplier of respiratory and other medical equipment and services for patients suffering from chronic illnesses such as COPD, Congestive Heart Failure, Chronic Respiratory Failure, Emphysema, Obstructive and Central Sleep Apnea and Thoracic Restrictive Disorders such as Scoliosis and Pectus Excavatum.

Due to several large industry consolidations and acquisitions over the last 5-7 years, and a late-to-the-game focus on Information Technology process adoptions, the organization has experienced significant growing pains. To compound already mounting frustrations, supply chain product shortages and staffing issues were significantly intensified by the arrival of the

global pandemic in early 2020. Substantial and continued turnover of our sales, service, and clinical teams along with employee burnout continue to prove problematic.

Safety issues also intensified during the last 24 months due to exhausted driving from overtime hours spent taking care of COVID-19 hospital-to-home patient discharges. Recent Medicare reimbursement cuts affecting the top-line budget closely monitored by our overseas board of directors have resulted in a pivot to cut costs (instead of investing in future growth), further decreasing the morale of an already exasperated workforce.

Departmental embeddedness causes a significant amount of friction disrupting the employee experience and slowing progress, in some cases negatively impacting the urgency in which patient care can be provided. Lack of a standardized on-going sales training program resulted in a near 60% turn-over of the sales position per year since 2018. Additionally, moving target bonus structures imply that our executive leadership team's concern about the appearance and/or presence of equity is not a priority.

As National Product Manager, I oversee the messaging, sales collateral and training associated with respiratory medications for COPD patients and our in-home clinical follow-up and compliance program CareCheck. I am also working with other departments to launch a new Remote Patient Monitoring product offering that would provide a focus on early intervention by providing recently and/or frequently hospitalized patients with blu-tooth enabled blood pressure, pulse oximetry and weighing options to allow their provider to effortlessly anticipate burgeoning disease process exacerbations.

***At The Abbey: Experience Informs Theory***

Proof of concept was never more quintessentially experienced than via my experiences at Valyermo. Texts from Chittister, Palmer, and Foulcher provided theoretical ideas of what to expect and where to direct our headspace. The writings of Dr. Carey provided even more specificity with not just abstract but actual insight into the Abbey we would be visiting. Yet, it wasn't until I was really in the thick of things that these ideas and readings really came into focus and resonated.

Humility was one of the most impactful concepts that I observed at the Abbey. "Remind yourself that God is everywhere, God is present as everyone. Each encounter is an encounter with God, demanding your utmost respect and attention" (The Rule of Benedict's Twelve Steps of Humility from the 12-Step Tradition, Shapiro). In *Reclaiming Humility*, Jane Foulcher states: "It is this commitment to the way of Christ, the way of humble love, that motivates both the individual and the community. Humility grows naturally in an environment of self-giving, mutual service" (p. 163).

A living example of humility was demonstrated in our interview with Father Issac Kalina, OSB. His on-going journey was one that was emotional and inspiring. I could relate to many of the specifics that Fr. Issac described which made his time with us especially emotional. Perhaps it was humility or purity of heart that was emanating from his presence; suffice it say I felt the presence of God pouring out of him and it touched me deeply. "This life makes me the best Isaac I can be," he said. "It frees me so I can pour myself out to whoever God puts about my path."

*Remedies for Our Times* encapsulates the experiences of Fr. Isaac further: “If the “why” of living under the Rule of Benedict is the attainment of purity of heart – that is, the ability to see clearly what is happening around you and to respond instinctively to what you are called to do – then the “how” of attaining purity of heart is through the cultivation of humility” (Carey, p 4).

Hospitality also informed my experiences at the Abbey. In *To Know as We are Known*, Parker Palmer mentions the dangers of being inhospitable: “To be inhospitable to strangers or strange ideas, however unsettling they may be, is to be hostile to the possibility of truth; hospitality is not only an ethical virtue but an epistemological one as well” (p 74).

In building a community where all voices are heard, valued, and enabled “the lesson of Benedictine hospitality for us is that we must work against the fundamentalism that excludes those that are different than us, or the nationalism that seeks to protect the borders from the entry of anyone not of our race, religion or ideology” (*Remedies for our Times*, Carey, p 4). In this way, hospitality becomes multi-faceted and transcends simply welcoming a person with shelter, fellowship, and nourishment but further it welcomes and values their insights, experiences, and humanity.

I believe this “double-duty” was instrumental in allowing me to slip into my true/authentic self more easily with both the monks and our Gonzaga community. I believe this welcoming – truly on all levels – had a noticeable impact on how quickly our group was able to gel and demonstrated that we must try to recapture or recreate some version of this in our organizational or personal life.

However, this special type of hospitality that we experienced had a pureness to it – that is to say, it was not hospitality in name only. It was not an obligatory or soulless act but one rooted in a deeper awareness that is closely dependent on the pursuit of humility and pureness of heart. Consequently, I believe singular hospitality will fail to recreate what is needed and must be practiced in conjunction with more.

Restraint of speech is another concept that was especially meaningful to me. Surprisingly, it has been the practice that continues to resonate and develop in my own personal and professional life. Chittister reminds us that the goal of silence is not just non-talking but rather “respect for others, a sense of place, a spirit of peace” (p 74). “Make no doubt about it, the ability to listen to another, to sit silently in the presence of God, to give sober heed, and to ponder is the nucleus of Benedictine spirituality. It may, in fact, be what is most missing in a new century saturated with information but short on...reflection” (Chittister, p 74).

What is more: silence helps reinforce the art of listening. Initially, that internal “listening” has helped me be a better listener in personal and professional interactions and to be fully present in the moment and conversation. And in my journey toward purity of heart, I am also now able to ask markedly more insightful and necessary follow-up questions that function to facilitate meaningful support and demonstrate my investment in bettering our situation, relationship, and community.

Additionally, this silence has allowed me to be more purposeful with my reactions and follow-up comments. Uncomfortably, I sometimes use humor as a defense mechanism or to help me connect with someone new. I have been able to almost entirely change this behavior that I

have so often used as a crutch. I continue to process this significant change and at this point only know for sure that it is somehow tied to the time that I set aside to sit in silence and that “spirit of peace” that Chittister mentions. So, too, it reminds me of that buzz word that was so prevalent in our discussion with Abbot Damien: discernment.

When I think back to our time with Abbot Damien, I feel like he beautifully (and somewhat effortlessly) encapsulated the best of us. One of his closing thoughts really resonated and continues to stay with me: “I’m just here for a time,” he said. “I’m just a page and eventually the page will be turned. I just try to do the best for everyone.”

***Back on the job: what is now known in theory is also seen in practice***

In *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Peter Block describes the Stuck Community as one “that markets fear, assigns fault, and worships self-interest” (p 37). “The overriding characteristic of the stuck community is the decision to broadcast all the reasons we are to be afraid” (p 37). Additionally, and more distressing, he contends that “The political agenda of a stuck community says that...employees are incapable of monitoring themselves and controlling each other, and that more careful oversight, institutionally mandated and installed, will build community, and provide for the common good. It is in fact an argument against building community and ends up leaving us more dependent” (p 40).

My current organization very much subscribes to the ideas of a stuck community. It is commonplace to use fear and the threat of retaliation to minimize turnover and maximize productivity. Their embedded aim to “provide for the common good” is often done with no

transparency or communication. Recent poorly planned and executed automations to improve and monitor productivity are rife with problems and do not offer reliable data. However, the disconnection between “the field” and “the C-Suite” – and most importantly the poorly functioning departments in between -- is so severe that this message has yet to be relayed or understood.

What we know about communities, though, is that they can be resilient when its members are engaged and free from oppression. Block calls it “the power of connectedness” (p 41). Palmer makes a good connection, too. The stuck organization demonstrates negative, hateful characteristics to its community. However, demonstrating the opposite has proven benefits: “The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here the act of knowing is an act of love...In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that communities’ bonds” (p 8).

Block also describes the benefits of emboldening “the citizen” within the community. Among other characteristics, he describes that the citizen is someone within a community who is concerned with the “well-being of the larger collective”, enter(s) into a collective possibility that gives hospitable and restorative community its own sense of being” and “attends to the gifts and capabilities of all others, and acts to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center” (p 65).



Here we see that research continues to support many of the basic behaviors and principles that were put in place by Benedict centuries ago. These on-going themes further cement the effectiveness of building community in this way. What makes this so relevant to my organization is that our philosophy is very much at odds with these teachings. And as our community continues to diminish and disappear, both practice and research support a different and better way to move forward -- one that invests time, attention, and love in each member of the community.

Block lays out the specifics in even greater detail as he draws a roadmap on how to begin to achieve this directional change by way of the example of the Hawaiian Democratic Party (p 98-99). "To create a community of accountability and belonging, we seek conversations where the following is true: An intimate and authentic relatedness is experienced; the world is shifted through invitation rather than mandate; the focus is on the communal possibility; there is a shift in ownership of this place even though others are in charge; diversity of thinking and dissent are given space; commitments are made without barter; and the gifts of each person and our community are acknowledged and valued" (p 98).

### ***Practical Applications (Proposed Cultural, Ritual and Practice Improvements)***

The culture at my organization is one rooted in fear and oppression. While I do not think this can be solved overnight, we can work to make mindful, purposeful changes in the ways we interact with those around us and our teams. I believe our community thirsts for this opportunity, and it will be very transformative if it can be properly facilitated. We know that

the act of knowing and pursuing interconnectedness is an act of love. We know, too, that listening and making space for the marginalized to share their gifts and experiences pays such high dividends in galvanizing community relationships and changing the way we relate to each other and to ourselves.

I propose that a member from each of our disjointed departments join forces into a small group. This group will meet bi-monthly to put into place these teachings and first foster the importance of this type of dialogue and interaction. Secondly, each department representative will go back to their department and begin to foster a humble, hospitable environment where others are able to share their ideas for improvement and share their experiences with others in their community. Over the course of the next 6-8 months, that group will continue to meet and organically build relationships, accountability to each other and an understanding of one thing that they can work together to improve in their department.

This meeting should occur at the same time, every week. It should be open to accept other organizational members into their midst and be prepared to enlist this peer to help them fix their designated action item. These meetings are more than just a high priority, they are at first an un-missable event and then a ritual.

What I loved so much about Vigils at The Abbey was the shared knowledge that together we would see the light of dawn and the darkest hours would subside. Lauds had an entirely different context to them, one filled with joy and possibility.

This project would ideally end with communication to the rest of the organization of what was occurring and what was accomplished. In the interim, morale would be boosted, and

community would grow. The long-term goal: that those not in charge would have accountability and ownership to each other improve the culture at our organization.

However, cultural improvement is only one part of this exercise. The other underscores the importance of the ritual of the weekly meetings and accountability to each other that is being cultivated. Again, if the monks can make it to dawn each day at Vigils, then the organization can weather their darkest times together, too.

Finally, the change in practice would be the launch of a peer mentoring program for new sales representatives. The goal in mind is to minimize turnover but also improve the employee experience by partnering the vulnerable new hire with a tenured, successful sales representative to assist with the hurdles that new employee can face during their first year on the job. The mentor is not there as a manager to sow anxiety and rule by fear but rather to demystify the process, provide support and context and build community.

In fostering accountability and belonging, the hope is that the new hire is less likely to leave the position and the local management that is already overwhelmed by staffing and equipment shortages, too, has support in managing and training this new employee.

Changing a toxic organization overnight is likely easier said than done. My hope with these practical applications is that they will provide some immediate relief and begin to instill some of the values that I have learned about in our texts and seen the power of firsthand during our time at St. Andrew's Abbey.

## ***Conclusion***

ORGL 522 has provided me with many unexpected gifts. In addition to having a very intimate understanding of the generative power of community by witnessing it in action, I have also been able to fully reconcile the importance of stillness, reflection, hospitality, humility, ritual, and purity of heart in the person that I strive to become. It may not be the exact application that the members of a monastic community may use but nonetheless I have found an application.

Further, the overlap between the findings of Peter Block in a non-monastic setting gives even more credibility to the ideas of Benedict in understanding the importance of how to build a truly pure and beautifully inclusive community.

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